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AUTHOR Connal, Louise Rodriguez
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ABSTRACT

The life of Nicholas Black Elk and the collaboration between him and John G. Neihardt on the book "Black Elk Speaks" presages or corresponds with current scholarly discussions of "transculturation." The diversity in society and the schools requires an enhancement of positive experiences in the inter-cultural "Contact Zones." Neihardt's and Black Elk's collaboration shows that "agency" (natives speaking for themselves and for their own view of their histories) can be accomplished in collaboration, even when the collaboration is between people of unequal power and control. The collaboration also shows that despite the fact that Black Elk could not control the final product, he did in fact have sufficient influence in the final product because of the element of "transculturation." Neihardt's and Black Elk's collaboration at documenting his childhood vision that he had the power to heal and the gift of prophecy shows the positive qualities of intercultural cooperation. The importance of "Black Elk Speaks" goes beyond the work's effect on the collaborators--Black Elk foresaw the need for his people to have a source of information about their own culture and spiritual lives. (Contains 20 references.) (RS)

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Inter-Cultural Elements in the Collaboration between John G. Neihardt and Black Elk: Meeting in the "Contact Zones"

My interest in aspects of life that are inter-cultural or cross cultural comes the fact that I've had to contend with both Puerto Rican family and cultural issues along with Euro-American cultural issues all of my life. From learning both Spanish and English, partying to the musical sounds of salsa and rock and roll, or dealing with the role of woman from a bicultural perspective, the concept of cross-over or transcultural issues discussed by scholars in this paper have been issues in my life. So I have recently begun to think of myself as a "contact zone." For this reason, I like to explore similar inter-cultural elements in the materials and situations that I encounter.

When studying the life of Nicholas Black Elk and the collaboration between him and John G. Neihardt on *Black Elk Speaks*, I found an interesting element that presages or corresponds with current discussions of "transculturation." In this paper, I wish to explore influences of each collaborator's culture on the other. I do not wish to undermine the importance of "Agency," natives speaking for themselves and for their own view of their histories, in works by Native Americans and other writers from under represented groups, but, rather, I

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hope to show that "agency" can be accomplished in collaborations, even when the collaboration is between people of unequal power and control. Furthermore, I hope to show that despite the fact that Black Elk could not control the final product of his collaboration with John G. Neihardt, he did in fact have sufficient influence in the final product because of the element of "transculturation." By reviewing this one collaboration, I hope to show the positive qualities of inter-cultural cooperation.

As Renato Rosaldo says in *Culture and Truth*, we can learn much by living, studying, or reading about other cultures. The diversity in our society and schools requires that we all enhance positive experiences in the inter-cultural "Contact Zones." The term "contact zones" is defined by Mary Louise Pratt as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 34). So it is possible to see inter-cultural influences between members from marginalized groups interacting with members from the dominant culture.

When Neihardt and Black Elk met in 1931, they began a collaborative venture that has influenced people both at the time the work was published and now when there is a renewed interest in Native American cultures. Their collaboration, interestingly, deals with or has elements of theories or practices that are currently under discussion in academic circles. Scholars like Mary Louise Pratt and Renato Rosaldo speak of interactions between or among members from different but neighboring cultures. In a post-colonial world the importance of agency of "minority" cultures in the ways their stories are told have become topics of importance. People fear that indigenous people, cultures, and stories themselves are harmed when there are ventures or collaborations between members from differing groups. And if the past is an example, we can see the logic in such thinking. But the fact remains that cultures have always interacted or melded in ways that create "transculturation" in varying degrees.

Prior to their collaboration both Black Elk and John G. Neihardt had experiences with people from the other's culture. DeMallie traces the life of Black Elk. From the notes presented by DeMallie, we know that Black Elk did not discuss with Neihardt his life among the whites. With the focus of the

collaboration on Black Elk's "great vision" it is possible that Black Elk's prior interactions with Euro-Americans did not seem important to the collaborative enterprise. It could be that by withholding some of the biographical data that concerned his life among the whites, Black Elk tried to ensure that Black Elk's "great vision" would be the focus of Neihardt's work.

Black Elk was born in 1863 into a Lakota world where the people "lived in daily interaction with the seen and unseen spirit forces that comprised their universe" (DeMallie 3). At the age of nine, Black Elk experienced his first vision in which he was "favored by the Thunder-beings (*Wakinyan*), embodiments of the powers of the west" (3). This vision was a life changing vision for it indicated to Black Elk the powers he would have to cure his people. The vision also gifted Black Elk with the power of prophesy (3).

Later in his childhood during the time of Chief Crazy Horse's murder, Black Elk traveled with his people to Canada. Subsequent to this time period, Black Elk revealed his vision to a medicine man and later to his people in fulfillment of requirements of his people's beliefs. It was following this period that Black Elk began his work as a medicine man. However, in time Black Elk began to feel that perhaps "it would

be better for his people to abandon traditional Indian ways and to take up those of white men. In 1886, in order to learn more about the man's way of life," Black Elk agreed to go sign up with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. Eventually the job took him to England. This marked the beginning of Black Elk's in depth contact with white culture. He experienced "genuine hospitality among the whites" and an admiration for Christianity. (11) Interestingly, we learn that Black Elk was literate in Lakota writing. For while he was away, Black Elk wrote letters to his people. This skill reveals Black Elk, along with other natives, as having the ability to communicate in a medium with which we can relate. In reading the translation I sense an interest in communications between white and Lakota cultures. He indicated that he had been able to learn a bit of English, "[a]nd a little while ago my friend gave me a translated paper [the *Iapi Oaye*] and I rejoiced greatly. Thus the Lakota will be able to translate English" (9). However, after Wounded Knee Black Elk's enthusiasm for white men's ways declined. It is interesting to note that Black Elk joined the Catholic Church and that in the ensuing years, he worked for the church among his people. For a time he continued to use his skills as a medicine man while he

worked for the church. His mission, within the realm of his duty to his people as a healer, underwent a change with the merging of the cultures.

Yet as Black Elk grew older, his sorrow at not having fulfilled or used his vision as directed by the Thunder Beings grew. Every time he looked at the plight of his people, he felt burdened by the knowledge that he might have prevented their suffering. He began to think that there yet could be a way to help his people through the knowledge he'd acquired in his vision. So that by the time of his meeting Neihardt in 1930, Black Elk felt a need to share the vision for the good of his people. It is important to note that though Black Elk had opportunities to share his vision with others interested in Sioux history and culture he did not share it others. I feel his ability to intuit the character of people helped him choose to whom he would tell his story. In Neihardt he found a kindred soul.

Thus both the man with a story to tell and the man who would transcribe and shape the story for publication approached the project without being "blank slates," a term Renato Rosaldo uses in his discussion of transculturation (Rosaldo 206). Each was participating in a story which merged at the time of their

meeting. "More often than we care to think, our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds" (Rosaldo 207-8). Both Geertz and Rosaldo agree that a collaboration entails understanding and respecting the points of view of those involved in the collaboration, as well as understanding the influences of the cultures of the people involved. Rosaldo reminds us that "the objects of social analysis are also analyzing subjects whose perceptions must be taken nearly as seriously as 'we' take our own" (Rosaldo 206).

Those of us who work on collaborative projects find that during the process of collaboration we can lose sight of whose ideas or words are used and whose are not used. This is a part of the collaborative process, this willing merging of effort. In Black Elk's case he was anxious to have the story of his vision preserved for his people. To ensure that his vision would be preserved, as I mentioned earlier, he exercised control over who the teller or "sender of words" would be. He also chose the place and method of the telling. I feel he sensed that Neihardt was a "mystic" and therefore ensured his assistance by adopting him into his family. I realize that scholars point out that he adopted Neihardt because otherwise, according to Sioux custom, he would not have been permitted to

share his great vision. However, adopting Neihardt had the effect of making Neihardt true to the spirit of Black Elk's vision. Thus, adopting and giving Neihardt an Indian name, Flaming Rainbow, impressed on Neihardt the responsibility for the story of the vision. (Black Elk, at a later time, also took in Joseph Epes Brown during a collaboration on *The Sacred Pipe*).

Neihardt was not a person with a "blank slate" when he and Black Elk began their collaboration. In *John G. Neihardt: A Critical Biography*, we learn that Neihardt had been exposed to the stereotypes about American Indians, as had many other Americans through such works as "Colden's *History of the Five Indian Nations* one of Parkman's sources, [which] affected the general impressions, and the numerous records, journals, and fictionalized biographies of explorers and mountain men . . . filled in picturesque if not always accurate details for readers fascinated with the excitement of western life" (144). The portraits of Indians in the materials that Neihardt and other Americans read were mixed and also untrue. For example, the mixed messages of "noble savage as in *Hiawatha* and the Leatherstocking tales, and of inhuman savage devoted to the torture of captives. A third stereotype rose later from the

situation of reservation Indians--the 'no-account' Indian, subhuman, dirty, lazy, and unteachable" (144-45). Yet Neihardt's experiences and indeed his nature did not allow him to accept stereotypes. Anyone who questions whether or not Neihardt should be taken at his word can make a quick review of his biography which reveals that he had experiences which led him to points of views not dependent on dominant cultural themes.

Experiences that helped to form Neihardt's character began in his youth. Neihardt was small in stature and in his childhood had to prove himself physically to town bullies. Also, and most importantly, when he was eleven years old he became ill. During that illness he had a vision, not unlike Black Elk's, that led him to believe he had a calling for his life. This mysticism differentiated him from others in white American culture. In the book, *The Song of the Indian Wars*, which was published before his meeting with Black Elk, he hoped to portray the conflict between Indians and settlers in a manner that revealed both points of view (145).

Neihardt did not see Indians as "types" (145). He told his friend, Julius House, "I am not interested in Indians as Indians -- only as people in a peculiar situation.

Human nature in the grip of fate --not Indian nature as a curiosity --interests me. And their poetry interests me only because it is human & poetry" (Castro 79).

Neihardt and Black Elk's collaboration reflects the success at preservation of an indigenous culture that can take place with cooperation, respect, and trust between the collaborators, even when one comes from a dominant or colonizing culture. Each of these collaborators had previous experiences which had opened their minds to the cultures and values of the other's culture. However, I feel Neihardt was more affected and influence by the collaboration. The mystical qualities of the Oglala medicine man's vision struck a chord with Neihardt's spirituality. Working with Black Elk not only helped Neihardt assist the Oglala Holy Man preserve his vision for his people, it helped Neihardt expand the focus of future his work on the "Cycle of the West" to include with greater emphasis the Native American point of view.

The importance of *Black Elk Speaks* goes beyond the work's effect on the collaborators or, according to Vine Deloria, Jr., its source of information for non-Indians. The importance is its usefulness to American Indians themselves. I believe that

Black Elk foresaw the need for his people to have a source of information about their own culture and spiritual lives.

> To them the book has become a North American bible of all tribes. They look to it for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, and for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life, now being eroded by the same electronic media which are dissolving other American communities. (Deloria xiii)

The fact that the book functions in a way envisioned by the Oglala Holy Man, Black Elk, indicates the ultimate success of the collaboration.

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